

The Museum of Modern Art

No. 21

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS EXHIBITION OF LARGE-SCALE PHOTOGRAPHS

Although the technical ability to make very large photographs has existed for over a hundred years, the artistic impulse to exploit size as an essential part of a photograph's content is new. The ways in which contemporary photographers have confronted the special aesthetic and technical problems of making large photographs are explored in the exhibition BIG PICTURES BY CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHERS, which will open in the First Floor Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art on April 14, 1983. The largest of the 33 pictures on view is a piece composed of 100 individual photographs which, when hung together, measures about 8 feet by 12 feet. John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, and John Pultz, Newhall Fellow in that Department, organized the exhibition, which will continue through June 28, 1983.

The photographs in BIG PICTURES were conceived for the wall. As a group, they survey a recent trend in photography to treat size and physical presence as consciously considered formal elements. The exhibition brings together the works of established photographers, such as Richard Avedon and Ray K. Metzker, and young practitioners, among them JoAnn Verberg, Casey Williams, Cindy Sherman, and Gérald Incandela, to examine the types of pictures that are possible when size is determined by formal considerations rather than viewing distance. More than 30 artists, including several noted primarily for their work in other media, will be represented in the exhibition by works dating from 1966 to the present. Approximately half of the pictures on view date from the last three years.

more/

Large photographic works differ from other photographs in ways other than size. "In making a classical photograph," John Pultz explains, "the photographer attempts to achieve the illusion of a coherent and seamless space, unaffected by the intervention of manual alterations or critical reconsiderations." The photographers shown in BIG PICTURES "revise that goal, overtly or subtly, to produce pictures that admit their artifice," he concludes. These large photographic works also differ from conventional photographic murals which assume a distant viewer. Intended for normal range viewing, large photographs often yield new information and a new structure as one approaches them.

The photographs in BIG PICTURES illustrate various ways of escaping the size-related constraints that are imposed by classical photographic aesthetics. According to Mr. Pultz, these strategies appear to fall into three broad areas of technical resource: the work may be a synthesis of several or many optically distinct images (or may depict a field of vision much wider than normal); the object described may be drawn at an unusually large scale; or the photographer may sacrifice from the beginning the traditional photographic virtues of linear sharpness and seamless tonal description. "Any of these procedures challenge our familiar sense of a photograph as an opening through which we see a real space and force the picture to defend itself as a physical object," notes Mr. Pultz.

The first of these approaches involves constructing large pictures from smaller, discrete modules. In some cases, numerous photographs of the same size are organized into a photographic mosaic that can be read as sequential fragments of reality. In other cases, the artist assembles photographs of events and objects that are clearly separated in time and space, producing a work that underscores the artist's will and the independent physical presence of the picture as an object.

In a second approach, photographers describe objects at an unaccustomed scale. One photographer, Cindy Sherman, derives inspiration for her large-scale, closely cropped photographs from motion pictures. She poses herself in carefully contrived settings that serve to recall familiar media stereotypes. "The size of the prints--one series is two feet by four feet--alludes to the larger-than-life scale of the motion-picture screen, where figures transcend everyday proportions. As Sherman's body approaches optical life size--so uncommon in photographs--the tension between role and the individual seems finally to give way to the dominance of the role," observes Mr. Pultz.

The third of these approaches sacrifices the technical standards of the classical photograph. Traditionally, a photograph reflects the linear and tonal qualities of the depicted object. By enlarging the negative beyond the conventional technical limitations, as Kathleen Agnoli has done, the mechanisms for accurately reproducing descriptive line and tone break down. "The print loses much of its descriptive quality and falls back on the tones and grain of paper and film," explains Mr. Pultz. While at first sight the work appears as an abstract lyrical fantasy, with great effort by the viewer the photograph does yield a representational scene. This very effort to form and maintain the image pulls the viewer into the depicted scene.

Three artists included in BIG PICTURES-- Nancy Hellebrand, William Wegman, and Brian Wood-- will discuss the problems of making large photographs on Thursday, May 26, 1983, at 8 p.m. in the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets to this evening of Artists' Talks are \$5.00, general public; \$4.00, MoMA members; \$3.00 students with current I.D., and can be obtained at the Museum's Lobby Information Desk, 18 West 54 Street, New York, or by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope with payment

more/

and request to: Department of Education, The Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. Ticket holders are invited to
view the exhibition prior to the program. Support for these talks has
been provided by the Associate Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

March 1983

For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director or Tamara
Karpie Real, Assistant Editor, The Department of Public Information, The
Museum of Modern Art, 18 West 54 Street, New York, NY 10019 (212) 708-9750
